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Prison nursery helps inmates and children, UIndy study finds

Participants show lower rates of re-arrest, higher rates of parental involvement

Inmates who live with their newborn infants in a special nursery wing at the Indiana Women's Prison are more likely to retain custody of their children after release and less likely to be arrested again, according to a new study from the University of Indianapolis' Community Research Center.

Center Director Kevin Whiteacre studies the corrections field and has seen many promising innovations that ultimately show no impact under greater scrutiny. This case, however, was different.

"The differences were not large, but they were there," said Whiteacre, an assistant professor of criminal justice and sociology at UIndy. "We expect so much from corrections. It's always exciting when something seems to be working."

With space for 10 women and their babies, the Wee Ones Nursery at the Indiana Women's Prison is among approximately 10 such facilities in the nation for inmates who are pregnant on arrival. Those who meet eligibility requirements can live there and receive childcare assistance and parenting education for as long as 18 months while serving their sentences, though the typical stay is much shorter. The prison on Indianapolis' west side maintains the nursery using grants and donated supplies.

Whiteacre and his graduate assistants analyzed data on 90 women who participated in the Wee Ones Nursery program and a comparison group of 98 women who gave birth at the prison before the nursery was established in 2008. CRC research assistant Stephanie Fritz also interviewed women from both groups to assess their attachment to their children and their opinions of themselves as parents.

The study, commissioned by the Indiana Women's Prison and the Indiana Department of Correction, found mild to strong support for all four hypotheses posed at the outset. The findings include:

- Nursery program participants had a lower rate of new arrests within one year of release than the control group – 26 percent vs. 31 percent.
- Participants had a significantly lower rate of new admissions to the Department of Correction within one year of release – 10 percent vs. 18 percent.
- After release, participants were more likely to have legal custody of the child delivered in prison (86 percent vs. 58 percent) and more likely to have caregiver responsibilities for the child (92 percent vs. 75 percent).

- Participants reported a significantly greater sense of parenting efficacy than the control group.

Prison Superintendent Steve McCauley said the findings support the nursery's mission of helping inmates to build healthy relationships with their children during the critical early months of life and to create a structure for the children's continued development.

"This study provides us an empirical indication that the WON program is beginning to fulfill our goal of success for the mothers and the babies," he said.

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This information was provided by the University of Indianapolis media relations office.

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